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An Exploratory Examination of the Impact of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

Carly M. Hilinski-Rosick and Alicia N. Blackmer

The purpose of this paper is to explore the feelings and reactions of university students enrolled in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Inside-Out is a nationally recognized program that has provided the framework for college courses to take place inside the walls of prisons and jails. Both college and university students and residents of correctional facilities take a college-level course, together, inside a correctional facility. Throughout the semester, students are required to write reflection papers that detail their observations, analyses, and reactions to the class sessions. The current research analyzed these papers to explore how the course was impacting students. Findings indicate that students had a wide range of reactions to the course, and often found themselves questioning their beliefs, punishment philosophies, and thoughts on the criminal justice system as a whole and the corrections system specifically.

Introduction

The goal of the current research is an exploratory examination of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (hereafter referred to as Inside-Out) and the impact that the program has on “outside” (i.e. college and university) students. The Inside-Out program allows college and university students to study alongside residents of a correctional facility in a semester-long course. While Inside-Out courses have been taking place for nearly 15 years, little research has been done on the program, particularly examining it from the perspective of the outside students. Existing studies have examined concepts such as self-efficacy (see Allred, Harrison, & O’Connell, 2013) among the students, the impact of the structure, content, and readings included in the course (Allred, 2009), and instructor reactions to the courses (Van Gundy, Bryant, & Starks, 2013), but to date, no known published study has used the outside student responses as a means to explore the impacts of the program.

Thus, the goal of the current research is to explore the Inside-Out program and its impact on students by examining the weekly papers written by outside students. The Inside-Out program is a unique program that affords many

students opportunities to explore topics of crime and justice behind prison walls. It allows students to interact with residents of a correctional facility in a mutually beneficial fashion, with the ultimate goal being a community of teaching and learning that transcends the bars, walls, and fences surrounding the program. The importance of continuing to examine the impact of the program cannot be underscored enough; for many of the outside students, despite overwhelmingly being criminal justice majors and minors, going inside the prison for the course is the first time they have been inside a correctional facility and also the first time they have any real interaction with someone who has been convicted of a crime and has been incarcerated. The course allows them to experience a side of the criminal justice system that is difficult to get in the traditional classroom setting.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

The Inside-Out Program is a nationwide program that began in 1997 at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was created to allow incarcerated men and women and college students the opportunity to study and learn together. Since 1997, the program has seen tremendous growth. More than 300 Inside-Out courses have been offered across 25 different states and Canada, and as of 2011, over 10,000 inside and outside students had taken an Inside-Out course (Pompa, 2013). Individuals interested in becoming Inside-Out instructors go through a rigorous week-long training process before offering their own Inside-Out courses.

Inside-Out employs an experiential education model which brings inside (incarcerated) and outside (college students) together to study inside a correctional facility. This model brings students together to study as peers “behind the walls.” Each week, 15–18 outside students travel to a correctional facility to meet with the same number of inside students. Both inside and outside students read a variety of different books and articles on topics ranging from theories of crime to restorative justice. Outside students bring their academic, and sometimes professional, perspectives of the criminal justice system and inside students bring the perspectives of those who have experienced the criminal justice system firsthand. Students write weekly papers and spend each class session discussing topics in both large and small groups. The semester culminates with a group project and a closing ceremony, where the students are celebrated.

Experiential/Service Learning

According to Rhoads (1997), service learning is about relationship-a relationship that is based on equality and collaboration. In a sense, according to Rhoads, service is seen more as the act of working with people rather than

serving them. At the crux of service learning is the impact that the experience has on all who are involved, including instructors, students, and others directly involved. As Pompa (2002) writes, part of the power of a service-learning opportunity arises from the interactions between those who are involved. This applies to the Inside-Out program seamlessly, as the program is a "reciprocal arrangement—everyone serves, everyone is served." One group is not 'teaching' the other; rather we are all learning together (Pompa, 2002, p. 69).

Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning becomes most effective when the information is situated within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. Part of Vygotsky's approach focuses on the internalization of concepts through interpersonal communication. This approach stresses active learning by students in an effort to expand consciousness, an increased relevancy of social interaction in knowledge development, and emphasizes the role of language in the communication process.

The Inside-Out program stresses this communication process, so much so that at the beginning of the semester, the class creates guidelines for dialog. Students are given the opportunity to offer suggestions for how the communication and dialog in the class should take place, and once an agreement is reached among students, these guidelines become the basis for communication throughout the semester. This communication occurs in a number of different ways, both formally and informally. Each class session is generally characterized by a combination of large- and small-group discussions. Additionally, students have time before class begins to have more casual conversations, much like what they would have with their fellow students in a traditional classroom. Admittedly, some of the most significant insights or epiphanies that students have are the result of the more informal conversations that they have, whether before or after class, or during class when they have finished discussing the assigned topic for the day.

The mission statement of Inside-Out identifies education as a transformative experience, and part of the mission of Inside-Out is to provide opportunities for both inside and outside students to have those transformative learning experiences (The Inside-Out Center, n.d.). It is in the weekly papers that these transformations become most evident. Outside students in particular often begin to question what they always have believed about crime, criminals, and punishment. They often identify the difficulties they have grappling with suddenly questioning everything that they have ever believed about how the criminal justice system should operate and what exactly is justice. Further, students often identify this course as one that has taught them more than any other college course they have taken; although there is no real way to measure this, the fact that students are this significantly impacted by the course speaks to its ability to transform students.

Overwhelmingly, research has suggested that service or experiential learning is beneficial to both the college and university students participating and the population who is being "served." The current research hopes to add to this body of literature by examining the impacts of the Inside-Out program on

outside students. Through an analysis of their weekly papers, themes regarding the impact of the course are explored.

Methods

The goal of the current research was to analyze attitudes of punitiveness and empathy among university students participating in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. To do this, student reflection papers were gathered from four sections of the Inside-Out class taught during the fall 2010, winter and fall 2011, and fall 2012 semesters through a medium-sized public university in the Midwest (hereafter referred to as "State University"). The papers analyzed here were those submitted by outside (i.e. State University) students only. Because the purpose of the research was to examine the impact of the course on outside students, it was not necessary to analyze inside student papers. Further, only papers of students who consented to have their paper analyzed and included in the research were used and all responses were kept confidential.

Each week throughout the semester, students were required to submit a reflection paper in which they reflected on the previous class. The goal of these papers was to allow students to work through their reactions to the class as well as to analyze and integrate their reading assignments with the class discussions. Each weekly paper followed the same format. The papers were split into three sections: observations, analysis and integration, and reactions. For the purposes of this research, the two most important sections were the observations and reactions sections. In these sections, students were required to list three observations about the previous class and their reactions to the class both during and after the class session.

A total of 151 papers were analyzed (34 from the fall 2010 semester, 37 from the winter 2011 semester, 37 from the fall 2011 semester, and 43 from the fall 2012 semester). These papers were submitted by 46 unique students (over the four semesters, there were a total of 54 outside students enrolled in the course; eight students across the four semesters did not consent to their papers being analyzed). To analyze the student papers, an open coding strategy was used. The initial coding of the papers identified passages that pertained to student attitudes towards punitiveness and empathy. Each paper was read and coded by both the first and second authors of this study. Each of the authors read through each paper, highlighting the themes of punitiveness and empathy. Additionally, the authors noted any other recurring themes that emerged from the data, such as overall impacts of the course, the humanization of the inside students, and surprise at the level of intelligence of the inside students. Once each of the papers was coded for the themes of punitiveness and empathy, the coded papers were compared to ensure that there was reliability in the coding process.

The coders then agreed on a set of emergent themes that were discovered through the analysis. These themes include: the humanization of the inside students, the intelligence of the inside students, internal struggles with changing beliefs, and general feelings about the course. Once this list was created, each coder re-coded the papers, looking specifically for these themes, and highlighting them. The papers were once again compared to ensure consistency and reliability among the coders. Finally, the coders selected passages that best illustrated each theme. These passages are presented below. They are verbatim and have not been altered.

Findings

Overall, the student response papers seemed to indicate that the course had a profound impact on the students across semesters. They consistently identified the course as one of the most valuable courses that they had taken, as a one in a lifetime opportunity, and as an experience that was unparalleled by any of their other courses. Students also found themselves critically assessing their own value and belief structure, particularly with respect to punishment and the criminal justice system process.

Conservative Punishment Philosophies

Previous research has indicated that criminal justice students exhibit higher levels of punitiveness and lack empathy. The papers analyzed here revealed that there were students who revealed more conservative punishment philosophies. These comments were most often reflected in the very early papers (i.e. in the first three weeks of the class) and often were not included in later papers.

- Citizens who are incarcerated should be placed on a second tier when it comes to distributing funds, especially in the aspect of education.
- Corrections should be given enough money to pay personnel and provide minimal opportunities from inmates.
- There is no justification in allowing a prisoner with no release date (as confirmed true for at least one inside student) to be afforded a college education while so many law abiding citizens are not.
- Some people choose not to be reformed, and therefore become career criminals. In regard to those individuals, "warehousing" seems like a viable alternative to reformation.

Given that much of the existing literature suggests that criminal justice students tend to hold more punitive beliefs, these findings are not surprising.

It is interesting, however, that students who felt this way still chose to take the course (as it is an elective course, students self-select into it).

Liberal Punishment Philosophies

Conversely, many students expressed more liberal punishment philosophies. These findings are also unsurprising, given that students who feel this way may be more drawn to a program such as Inside-Out, which gives them a unique opportunity to study inside a prison and place value on a group of individuals that have generally been marginalized in society.

- In my opinion, education should be the top priority. It should be a priority in the prison system, as well as, in society for the juvenile population. Funding should be directed to more educational programs in the prisons and the “get tough” policies should be re-evaluated.
- To really get at the heart of the crime problem though, a multidimensional approach should be developed which reforms the offender and uses them to create change, but also addresses the community and rejuvenating it in order to change the way of life in the streets.
- Training, education, and aftercare programs are needed to assist the ex-offender once released from prison; without this assistance, failure is sure to come to the offender because they often feel there is no other way for success.
- Crime does come along with addictions, however we fail to treat the underlying problem most offenders have, thus leading us to an absolute failure in using the criminal justice system as a means to help such offenders.

Further, students seem to recognize some of the failures of the criminal justice system to really address the needs of inmates and transform them so that they are able to be productive citizens upon their eventual return to society.

Empathy for the Plight of Inside Students

Many students also wrote about the empathy that they felt for the inside students that often came from the ability to put a face with the abstract label of “criminal” or “prisoner.” It is clear from the papers that this class really opened student’s eyes to the fact that inmates, while given some privileges while they are incarcerated, are deprived of many tangible and intangible things. Sitting next to someone and knowing that you were free to walk out of the prison and they were not seemed to be a very enlightening and powerful experience for many students.

- We are free to drive, go anywhere we want, sleep in warm beds, and eat anything we want. Meanwhile the prisoners walk to a different building to sleep in a cold, hard bed, not getting to go wherever they please, or knowing that they may die in the prison in which they reside.
- The very small actions, like going for a walk or riding my longboard were something he was not able to enjoy. It makes me appreciate my privilege more and take more minutes out of the day to actually adore the gentle breeze or the leaves changing colors.
- I took for granted my right to have reliable healthcare, over the counter medicine, doing things when I want to, and being able to have a nice warm comfortable bed to sleep off an illness. Some of these things our inside students have learned to live without.
- It is crazy to think that some of these inside students are in there for life and will never be free to experience the things that the outside students are able to see and hear on a daily basis.

One unanticipated result of the course and the students' experiences seems to be that they appreciate the privileges and benefits that they have as free citizens. Although this course and program is in no way intended to be a deterrence program, it does seem to impact students in a way that has them noticing the good things in their life.

Internal Struggle with Changing Beliefs

One of the most common sentiments expressed by students semester after semester is that they struggle with their changing beliefs. Many of the students are juniors and seniors who have spent the past few years of their college education thinking one way, and then all of a sudden they find themselves questioning what they have always believed. Students also seem to struggle with their changing beliefs particularly when they go against the beliefs of their parents or other close family members. It often seems that students may feel like they are betraying themselves or their parents if they start questioning their beliefs and finding themselves believing things that they never did before.

- Upon leaving the prison I noticed that I had some conflicting feelings in regard to the people I just encountered. Leading up to that evening I viewed inmates as a lower class of humans, after all these are the degenerate who cannot live and function in society and must be caged up to protect everyone in the world from them. After our two hour class, I learned that this may not be true for all inmates. While some truly are too dangerous for society, there are plenty more who simply made a bad decision in life which landed them behind bars.

- I still find myself struggling with the idea of becoming friends with these inside students, as it was mentioned that many from last semester had. Going into law enforcement and having served in the military I find myself constantly opposing these types of individuals. Not in a sense that I feel I am in a conflict against them, but that I feel the world would be much safer and more pleasant without them on the streets.
- Initially I felt cautious about being in this class with 15 criminals and now I feel like it is just being in class with other students.
- Before attending these classes, I was somewhat fearful and knew that these offenders were dangerous and crooked. However, now, when I am in class I feel like I'm just hanging out with my father's friends.
- When I first started school I was not excited to know that prisoners could do all these things, with my growing pool of knowledge I realize that it is necessary on many levels, I am not bothered anymore by most of the opportunities afforded to the inmates and I am glad that many of the inside students are taking full advantage.

Intelligence of Inside Students

Another impact of this course seems to be the breaking down of commonly held stereotypes or beliefs about inmates in general, and their intelligence specifically. One of the consistent themes across semester is surprise among the outside students at the level of preparedness of the inside students as well as how well read and knowledgeable they are on a vast array of topics.

- I also feel like many of the outside students, including myself walk away from each session impressed by the insight and intellect of the inside students. Although they are convicted offenders, they still have a lot to contribute to the large- and small-group discussions.
- I have been impressed by the knowledge, insight, and intellect of the inside students. Before class, I knew there were some intelligent people in prison; however, I was not fully prepared for so many of them to jump at the chance to contribute to this opportunity.
- In many ways, the inside students are more impressive than outside students because of the level of their critical thinking and analysis, as well as the ability to apply direct quotations to relevant class discussion.
- I was shocked that some of the inside students were so smart and some had college degrees.

Humanizing of Inside Students

Lastly, one of the enduring impacts of the course has to be the humanization of the inside students that the outside students often experience. Despite

being criminal justice majors and minors, the majority of the students who take this course have never known, or come into contact with, someone on the "other side" of the criminal justice system. Most students have not been inside of a prison, let alone sat next to a convicted criminal for 15 weeks. The class seems to allow the outside students the ability to put a face to an abstract concept, much like the students did when discussing how they were empathetic to the deprivations experienced by the inside students. Outside students wrote of seeing the inside students not as criminals or inmates, but as friends, fellow students, and good people who, although having been convicted of a crime, are not defined by their worst action.

- Underneath the jeans and t-shirt, orange and blue, we are all just people.
- A crime does not tell the story of a whole man's life.
- The people who are in prison, especially the people who are serving life sentences for the most heinous crimes, are viewed as animals but in reality, these are real people too.
- All of the inside students have treated us outside students with respect and all seem to be very nice people, aside from having committed crimes. Even after having committed crimes, they are still people and do not deserve to be thought of us as animals.
- The class was very eye opening for me. It stressed and made me realize that people need to take the time to talk to others before they jump to conclusions, even if they are prisoners.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Inside-Out Program on university students. Many students began the semester writing about how they felt that inmates should get nothing beyond the bare minimum, that education for inmates was a waste of money (which was an interesting statement, given the fact that they were involved in a course that aimed to educate inmates, among other things), and that many people chose not to reform or rehabilitate themselves and thus should be warehoused. Given the prior research that has found that many students, particularly criminal justice students, hold very conservative and punitive punishment philosophies, these findings were not surprising. What was interesting about these findings, however, is that students self-selected to take this class. It is an elective course and the students enrolled chose to be in the course, yet they often wrote about their lack of support for prison programming, education, and any "perks" that inmates might receive. This finding can be interpreted a number of different ways. It is possible that students were unsure of how they really felt about these topics when enrolling for the class, and when prompted to really think about them, their conservative philosophies emerged. Possibly more likely,

however, is that many students felt that they needed to challenge their own beliefs and broaden their experiences as they move toward graduation and a potential career in the criminal justice field. Perhaps one student said it best when he revealed to the class that he thought that inmates were “the scum of the earth” but knew that if he was truly going to be successful working in law enforcement, that he needed to challenge his beliefs and become more open minded.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, many students expressed more liberal punishment philosophies, favoring prison education, rehabilitation, community action, and aftercare. Once again, these results were not surprising given the self-selection into the class. It is plausible that students who already held these beliefs were drawn to the class and the course and their interactions with the inside students only further reified their beliefs on correctional practice and punishment philosophies. Given that many, if not all, of these students plan to go on to a career in the criminal justice field one day, recognizing the need for education, rehabilitation, and reform of our current corrections system is necessary to take the criminal justice system through the twenty-first century.

One of the unexpected benefits of the course was that many of the outside students wrote that they felt empathy for the inside students and the things that they must give up upon their incarceration. Although in no ways intended to be any sort of deterrence program, the class helped students realize that prison was not a nice place and that in no way did they ever wish to reside there. Further, seeing and touring the prison along with interacting with the inside students allowed the outside students to show a greater appreciation for the freedoms that they had, particularly simple things that people often take for granted. These feelings also often came through as outside students wrote of their desire to provide even basic human comforts to inmates. While many had initially gone into the course believing that shelter, food, and clothing were sufficient, many revised this stance as the semester went on and recognized the need for more availability of different privileges and opportunities within the prison, both for morale purposes and for rehabilitation purposes.

Part of this empathy process was the humanizing of inside students that many outside students experienced during the semester. Most students had never interacted with someone who had committed a crime serious enough to warrant their incarceration. Further, many of them had never been inside a prison. Each semester, many students stated that they viewed the labels of “criminal” or “inmate” in the abstract, meaning that they never really had a face to put with the individuals they wanted to punish harshly. Upon spending 15 weeks sitting side-by-side with convicted criminals, however, most students began to see them as real human beings, with feelings just like everyone else, rather than just someone who committed a crime and was in prison. This humanization process allowed many of the natural barriers that were present in the classroom to break down. By realizing that the inside students were just like them (albeit with some obvious differences), outside students were able

to look past the orange and blue prison uniforms, past the inmate number plastered on all of their belongings, and past the fear that they initially held upon coming in to the prison to view them as fellow students and maybe even a friend.

Part of this humanization process was the realization that many of the inside students were extremely well read, regularly watched the news and other educational programming, and in general, were very knowledgeable about current events, politics, and the criminal justice system. Each semester, many outside students express feeling inadequate or underprepared when they come to class because the inside students know so much. Many outside students expressed that upon seeing how prepared the inside students were, they spent more time reading, on their papers, and preparing for class in general. The level of preparedness of the inside students also made the outside students aware of the opportunity that they have for a college education, something that they often took for granted. The inside students were grateful for an opportunity to take a college course and were unlikely to squander that opportunity by being unprepared.

Finally, one of the recurring themes across student papers was the internal struggle they felt when they found themselves challenging long-standing beliefs. Many came in with the belief that inmates should get the bare minimum and we should not provide any sort of benefits to them. As they spent time in the class, interacting with the inside students, and learning more about prison life, many of the outside students began to question these beliefs. They wondered whether what they had always believed was correct. Many felt that they were betraying family or friends or even themselves by questioning their beliefs. Ultimately, this was one of the overarching goals of this class; not necessarily to change anyone's beliefs, but to challenge them to question things and seek out what is right and just. Perhaps the most important lesson learned in this course was not from a book, or even from the instructor, but came from the students' ability to look within themselves with a critical eye, and look to the criminal justice system with a critical eye, to ask the important questions about what is right and what they believe.

Although informative, this research is not without its limitations. First and foremost, causality cannot be shown. There is no way to test whether it was this class that changed students beliefs or other experiences that they had. This was not possible from the available data. Further, there is also no way to determine the long-term impacts of the course from the student papers. Future research should include follow-ups with students who have taken the course to determine whether there was any lasting impact on them as they continued on in their college career or whether they took any of the information they learned or experiences they had with them as they began work in the criminal justice field.

Despite the inability to establish causality or the long-term effects of the course, it is clear that the short-term impact of the class is a significant one. If nothing else, the course provides the opportunity for inside and outside

students to have a very unique experience, one that they very likely may not have otherwise. Perhaps one outside student said it best when he or she wrote that “the course was the most valuable class they had taken during their college career” and they felt it should be required of anyone who wanted to work in the criminal justice field. While obviously not feasible, this quote captures the value and strong feelings students have about this course; it is clearly an experience that profoundly impacts them.

Notes on Contributors

Carly M. Hilinski-Rosick is an associate professor at Grand Valley State University. Her research interests include victimology, particularly crimes against women, assessing the relationships between fear of crime and individual behaviors and attitudes, and crime on the college campus. Her recent publications have appeared in *Crime and Delinquency*, *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *Criminal Justice Review*, and *Criminal Justice Studies*.

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